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4701 WILLARD AVENUE, CHEVY CHASE, MARYLAND 20815 (301) 656-4068

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PROGRAM All Things Considered

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SUBJECT Nicaragua

SUSAN STAMBERG: Direct negotiations between the United States and Nicaragua were broken off last month by the Reagan Administration. U.S. officials said they'd felt the talks weren't going anywhere and were getting in the way of the regional Contadora negotiations, which have also broken off.

Today Administration officials said they would wait and see what kind of new proposals Nicaragua is making, but they made it clear they were not expecting very much.

NPR's Bill Buzenberg has more on the American reaction.

BILL BUZENBERG: Secretary of State George Shultz gave the Administration's first reaction to Nicaragua's peace proposal today during a hearing before a House subcommittee. It was a cool reaction, the same as that given Nicaraguan offers in the past.

SECRETARY OF STATE GEORGE SHULTZ: As far as the statement made by Mr. Ortega yesterday, we know of no content. It's just a statement. Maybe there'll be some content. We'll examine it.

BUZENBERG: White House spokesman Larry Speakes said later that the Administration wanted concrete proposals from Nicaragua rather than a show-and-tell propaganda offensive.

Secretary Shultz told members of Congress there's no end to the efforts the United States has made to work out a reasonable solution in Central America. "We haven't succeeded," he said, but blamed Nicaragua for that, saying they only negotiate when they're under military pressure, and suggesting they'll have

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to change.

SECRETARY SHULTZ: We haven't said that we are unwilling to meet with them, just that there's no point in it right now unless they have a different view.

BUZENBERG: Shultz ran into heavy criticism on Capitol Hill today for both his and President Reagan's recent comments on the Sandinistas. One Democrat charged they're using Red-baiting rhetoric in trying to make Nicaragua into a direct threat to the United States.

The Administration's stepped-up campaign against Nicaragua began 11 days ago with the President's weekly radio address, in which he called the rebels, or Contra forces, "our brothers," and the Sandinistas "a Marxist-Leninist clique."

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN: Now they're exporting drugs to poison our youth and linking up with the terrorists of Iran, Libya, the Red Brigades, and the PLO. The Sandinistas aren't democrats, but communists; not lovers of freedom, but of power; not builders of a peaceful nation, but creators of a Fortress Nicaragua that intends to export communism beyond its borders.

BUZENBERG: Today, when Secretary of State Shultz also charged that the Nicaraguans and Cubans were engaged in narcotics trafficking to generate funds, Democratic Congressman Ted Weiss of New York got angry. "Whatever their drug role," he said, "it's minuscule compared to that played by countries who are allies of the United States, such as Mexico, Colombia or Jamaica."

Congressman Weiss:

REP. TED WEISS: It seems to me that the Administration's policy toward Nicaragua has been an exercise in twisting facts, in distorting facts, in misstating facts.

Take a look at the statement you make that you're willing to accept any reasonable solution that the Nicaraguan government offers, and then equate that with the statements you have been making and the President made at his press conference about reasonableness being the Nicaraguan government saying uncle.

BUZENBERG: Weiss said it's a distortion for the United States to threaten Nicaragua militarily, and then when it builds up its armed forces to charge that Nicaragua is threatening aggression against its neighbors. He charged it's a distortion to equate the freedom fighters in Afghanistan, who are battling Soviet troops, with the rebels in Nicaragua, who are fighting in a country that, while not perfect, has had an election, has an

opposition newspaper, and still has a large private-sector economy.

Weiss said such distortions reminded him of the 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings. He quoted the Army's attorney as saying to Senator McCarthy, "Have you no decency, sir?"

That made Secretary Shultz angry.

SECRETARY SHULTZ: I think it is the ultimate perversion to say that an attack on the tactics and strategy of Nicaragua is comparable to the tactics of Senator Joe McCarthy. And when you compare me with Senator Joe McCarthy, I resent it deeply. I will have no part of it and I have no further comment to make.

BUZENBERG: Shultz wouldn't answer Weiss's questions until he apologized. Weiss later did apologize, but he said he wasn't comparing Shultz to Senator McCarthy, but the Administration's distortions to McCarthy's tactics.

In some ways, that bitter exchange illustrates the tensions raised between the Administration and Congress over the Contra funding issue. The Administration wants \$14 million more for the Contras, but that requires approval by both the House and the Senate. Three times before, the House has rejected it by margins ranging from 33 to 64 votes. Despite its current campaign, the Administration still has not been able to crack the House on this issue, according to both Republicans and Democrats.

Susan Benda of the Center for National Security Studies, an opponent of Contra aid, keeps tabs on the expected vote. She says that in the Senate there are 47 opponents of Contra funding, a slim majority for the President. But that's reversed in the Democratic-controlled House.

SUSAN BENDA: The House majority is solid. We found no slippage at all on the vote for renewed covert assistance on this proposal for \$14 million. We've been checking the likely Democrats and Republicans, those we thought might not be with us, and there is no significant slippage.

BUZENBERG: If the Administration doesn't have the votes in the House for more Contra aid, then why the current campaign? White House officials say it's because the President sincerely believes Nicaragua is a problem, the American public needs educating, and U.S. allies in the region need reassuring.

With the current congressional ban on Contra funding, one official said, "All the President can send them is the signal he's with them."

Speaking out also helps the Contras raise money privately -- they're said to be getting a million dollars a month -- and attract recruits. White House officials say that a thousand Nicaraguans joined the Contras after the President's radio address.

State Department officials say Secretary Shultz is considering a list of options if Congress won't approve more aid for the Contras. That list includes some illegal alternatives, such as diverting economic aid meant for Honduras, channeling money through third countries or through the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency.

Today on Capitol Hill, Secretary Shultz wouldn't talk about those alternatives, but he did offer this assurance:

SECRETARY SHULTZ: Whatever is done will be done under proper and authorized procedures of the Congress.

BUZENBERG: What the Contras need most of all, U.S. officials say, is logistical support. Apparently, they can get money and arms elsewhere, but they have trouble supplying men in the field and coordinating their efforts, functions the CIA used to perform.

If covert Contra aid is turned down by Congress, as now appears likely, the Administration may seek a compromise with Congress to allow some kind of minimal logistical support for the Contras. Whether even that will be acceptable to the House is uncertain.